BUFFALO DEATH MASK

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Abstract

Buffalo Death Mask is a twenty-three minute short digital movie made in 2013. A conversation with Canadian artist Stephen Andrews returns us to a pre-cocktail moment, when being HIV positive afforded us the consolation of certainty. The essay looks at the artist's beginnings in the materialist utopia of The Funnel, the fears that have provided a reliable ground and companion to work, and a process of re-search that marries the impulse to finish with the necessity of never stopping. Its longest and concluding chapter details the process of making *Buffalo Death Mask*, learning to see via the gift of illness, portrait as collaboration, friends as living memory, and life after death.

Table of Contents

Intro

The thesis essay has arrived in six parts. It opens with a discussion of my method, and closes with a detailed look at *Buffalo Death Mask*, the short digital movie I made in 2013. In between are a pair of what moviemakers like to call establishing shots. There are a couple of chapters on emotional establishing shots narrating fear and death. And there is a chapter that tries to approach the simple and complicated question of what artists might be doing when making experimentalist movies. Why all this need to trouble the form?

Each chapter opens with a brief question by Chase Joynt, my hidden interlocutor in all this. It has been helpful to try to speak to someone specifically with sentences that might have begun with our own naming, and it is part of a larger dialogue we are having about plagues and bodies and the technology of genders.

1. Research

Chase: How do we begin?

Mike: Perhaps inevitably, after all these years living in the universe of my computer, I am struck by the gravitational pull of my new home, this university. One of the ways it seeks to replicate itself, like any good virus, is through language, itself a social viral activity. It's hard not to be struck, for instance, by the acronymization of language — fyi I'm an mfa with a ¼ ta omg. All those dreaded English words no longer need to be spoken, like the name of God in the Jewish religion.

I've been here for about a year and a half now, and over and over again I've heard the work that I do, and the work that others around me do, re-described as research. It's also a word that SSRC uses, not incidentally. And it made me wonder: what is research? Re, the prefix, has a Latin derivation, and it means to do something again, it signifies a backwards motion. It's a tone in music, and also an acronym for Real Estate, Reformed Episcopal, Religious Education, Right Excellent and Royal Engineers. It also has something to do with regarding, in regard to, concerning. It's a word that is also a pointer.

Re: this thesis. re: this defense.

And then there is searching. Re: searching. I guess I must have lost something, why else would I be looking for it? Why else would I be searching? And I haven't only lost it once, I seem to lose it again and again, and this prompts: a re-searching. The backward movement that is the forward movement. It's a kind of music, a kind of real estate. I think this is a beautiful challenge: how can I lose something again and again? Maybe I never had it in the first place. How do I do my research?

In my thesis, I have been asked to spare a few words about my practice. What does your practice look like in language, as a heap, as Beckett liked to call it, a heap of words?

Like the others in my cohort, I have come here with my research, my attempts at being lost over and over again, and in order to help this along I have been asked to take a course. There has been a course set out for me, a course laid out for us, and this required course is the graduate seminar. Like the return in research, it happens not once, but twice. The dominant form of the grad seminar is the artist's talk. In the artist's talk the artist gives an account of themselves, of their work, their methods. It's not entirely dissimilar to what might happen in rooms like this, rooms dedicated to defenses and theses. I've heard a lot of artists talks in my time here in the course that has been set out for us, and I feel that many of them share a common geometry. The traditional artist talk, even if the work is untraditional, the traditions of the untraditional then, is chronological. It begins at the beginning, or a beginning, and it ends at the end, which is now. The geometrical figure, the common geometry, is a straight line, actually it's a timeline, and on that timeline the artist hangs their work, one after another. It's not a rule, it doesn't happen every time, but very often the geometry of the grad seminar, the geometry of the artist's talk, the geometry of the course is a straight line.

So as someone who is dedicated to research, I am compelled to ask: is the geometry of my research a straight line? Does it proceed from one point to the next in a chronology? How I wish that it did. There are for instance large financial rewards for someone who has the gift of prophecy, like Alfred Hitchcock's famous storyboards, who can lay out exactly what they are going to do before they actually do it. But whenever I try to do this I fail, and this failing, or let's be more generous and call it: making an approach – when I make an approach something is always left behind, left out, something doesn't work, and so another approach needs to be made. And then another, and another. The geometrical figure that describes my

artmaking is not a straight line but a continual looping back and starting over. The figure is a circle in motion, a circling, what the Zen folks would name an enzo.

In other words there is a division between the artist talk which may be thought of as a straight line, and an artist's practice which may be thought of as an always moving circling. Line versus circle, noun versus verb. I have seen my comrades struggle mightily with this division. Because one of the necessary components of practice is that it is unfinished. I remember my friend Tom, a genius painter from the Slade who painted day and night for two decades until one day he approached the canvas and made a single slash across the rectangle. Huge painting. He didn't eat or sleep for seven days, but stayed in the studio. He studied the painting in every kind of light, and when at last he felt that he couldn't add or subtract anything from the first originary gesture, that it was optimal, that the painting was fine exactly the way it is, he cleaned his brushes and closed up his studio and he never painted again. The painting was finished, and he was finished as a painter. There was nothing more to do, nothing more for him to research, to get lost in. Or that's the story he told himself.

Perhaps our stories, the stories we cherish and hold dear or even the stories we like to punish ourselves with, have a deep relationship to practice. And perhaps some of us have come to school not to learn more stories, but to untie the knots of some of our old, pesky and persistent tales. It can take a lot of energy to keep yourself a corpse.

When people ask me what I do, I've started describing my practice in this way, because having to explain research, re-searching, getting lost and staying lost, it sounds too faraway. So I reach for the Wumenguan aka the Gateless Gate or the Gateless Barrier. It is a collection of Chinese koans and I love number 38 the best. Koans are often very short, they come in dialogue form, they were part of an oral tradition and then usually collected by a single teacher where they became part of a koan curriculum. Students would work through

koans in sequence, through the koan curriculum in sequence. Of course as a student you could work on a single koan the rest of your life. Here's the one I've been working on my whole life.

Wuzu Fayan said, "It is like a water buffalo (an ox) that passes through a window. Its head, horns, and four legs all pass through. Why can't the tail pass through?"

What I think the word "research" is inviting me to embrace is a form of not knowing, and I think this is so important. If I'm going to do research in this room, it's important for me not to know what's already going to happen in this room. The usual schtick in a place like this, in rooms like this one, is that we're going to come here in order to know more, in order to accumulate, to grasp. But as the words of the university so helpfully remind me: I am also here not to know, not to accumulate. I'm also here to get lost, again and again.

I think of artists as the most practical people because an artist is always engaged with materials of some kind. What could be more practical than the question of material interaction? If I was a philosopher I would be content to dream away ideas, but as an artist I am compelled to ask: what is the practise of research, the practice of being lost, the practice of not knowing? What does it look like, taste like, feel like? How do I do it?

Koans are a central piece in the Zen tradition of Buddhism, very common in Chinese, Korean, Japanese Buddhist practices. Each student needs to find an answer for themselves, for each koan. Every answer is entirely singular, and it's not a matter of being clever, or understanding a system and breaking it down, like math. You become the answer with your whole body-mind or you don't. And after you do, the tradition is that you write a poem to signify your understanding, your new understanding of the koan.

The 48 koans known as the Gateless Gate were gathered up by a guy named Wumen Huikai in twelfth century China. Would you like to hear his poem about case thirty eight? It's very beautiful. Here is the zen maestro, offering a commentary on Why Can't the Tail Pass Through? As I read it, I hope you understand that all I am talking about is my practice. All I am talking about, is research.

If it passes through, it will fall into a ditch;
If it turns back, it will be destroyed.
This tiny little tail –
What a strange and marvelous thing it is!

Infection

Perhaps I could turn to another tiny little tail. Do you think you could be haunted, ghost ridden, plagued, by a tiny little tail, by a word even? Are there words that come to haunt an entire generation? I don't know how it was for you, but for me, one of those words was infection. Are you infected? Do you have it? Are you going to have it? Are you showing the signs? Have you become the symptom, the presenting symptom, of your infection?

Throughout the 80s, and half way through the 90s, if you were infected with the HIV virus, you were dying. Being infected meant that you were carrying not only the certainty of your own death, but the possibility of death for everyone that touched you. In other words, it was an illness that wasn't going to pass. You weren't going to get over it, you would never be separate from it. The infection was never going to end. And in exactly that sense, the act of infection became for me an image, a picture, of practice. Call me crazy. Marriage never really worked for me. You know: until death do us part. As the old saying still goes. Marriage felt like duty, like some kind of socially sanctioned masculinist bondage contract, at the very least, not like research, not like getting lost for instance, marriage felt like the very opposite of getting

lost. But infection, an infection that would never end, could you imagine that it might become a picture of practice? A picture of research? Could my infection become the tail that never gets through the window?

One of the things about HIV infection was that your body kept changing, until you could hardly recognize it any more. You'd start the weekend twenty one years old, and by Sunday night you were an old man. Time grew drunk and disorderly. I'd walk into the doctor's office and there were gym rats in their prime, shining, oiled perfect twenty five year olds, except that was last winter. This winter they're stooping into the room on a cane, and they've got the marks on them, the marks of kaposi sarcoma infection. Sometimes blind, and shaking, their clothes hanging off them, like they'd bought them all three sizes too large for the large lives we used to have.

It won't be long. It's won't be long now.

The body you can't recognize, the body that keeps changing, the body that belongs to you but doesn't belong to you. The intimate body, the body of touch. All this was also a part of practice. An artist's practice. We live in a culture that fears the body, that has been designed to banish all notions of the body. Isn't that why they build rooms like this one? This room has not been designed for the body, but for the mind. This room, so many rooms in this university insist, that the mind is first and beautiful and important, while the body is second, and not beautiful and disgusting. Although not in the artist's studios, not in the clutter, the temporary archives and arrangements, the surfaces that have been rubbed and scraped and abraided, here in the artist's studios are places where the body lives and the mind lives as if there were no need pull them apart. But in a culture that fears the body, often it is sickness which brings our attention back to it. My shoulder hurts. Did I ever notice I had a shoulder before it started hurting? Did I know I had a liver before it stopped processing toxins? The infection brings me

back to my body, it roots me in my body's experience, as something mysterious and unknowable and filled with sensations.

Like a practice. Like the practice that I'm describing, the circling, the verb, the never quite arriving, the re-searchings. Could the hauntology – haunt, haunting, hauntology — could the hauntology of infection also be described as a kind of research? As our bodies were remade, visited by diseases doctors hadn't seen in decades, or at all, they were too young, they didn't know. Being infected with the HIV virus meant that something living in your body, was now living in my body. It was a way for us to hold each other, to hold the memory of each other even. We turned into versions of each other, of each other's pneumonias and lesions and wasting, of each other's secret longings, and our not so secret longings. It's not just my practice, it's our practice. The virus connects me to our practice, to the notion of a collective practice that begins inside the body. That begins only between bodies, that is passed between, that is transmitted, that is touched, between bodies. The biologist might name it: a living culture. A culture, a transmission, a co-infection. What does it mean to practice together? To share a practice?

The way the infection went on and on, replicating itself, it makes me wonder: what is replication exactly, if it's not a form of memory? A demonstration of memory even. In *Buffalo Death Mask* Stephen Andrew talks about memory and death. He says that when his lover Alex died he was doubly bereft, he had lost not only Alex, but also the memories that Alex held of him. He lost part of himself as well. Could we describe memory as a kind of infection? Do we infect each other with memories, with gestures so beautiful or so terrible they can't be buried, with the world's funniest opening line, with some trace-leaving contact moment? In our language we have this saying: he has an infectious smile, she has an infectious laugh. His smile becomes my smile via infection. Her laugh becomes my laugh, lives inside my body, via infection.

I think the memories of Alex that Stephen describes, Alex his partner, are held in the body. I think we've all experienced the way a body contracts or opens to a touch, how memories of touch are stored and storied across the whole body/mind. Perhaps the body is made of memory, layers of, surface after surface of, archaeologies of memory. And these memories don't only belong to me. Perhaps this body, this impure body/mind, is made up of other people's memories. In other words, infections. Perhaps the body-mind is made of infections.

I guess I'm wondering whether there's any way to bring together the two geometric figures: the line and the circle. The line, the chronology and timeline that characterizes the artist's talk, and the circling as the figure that characterizes an artist's practice. This artist's practice. Could the talking, the infection of talking, embrace the circle, could the talking also be part of re-searching? Because it seems to me that when we are open, when we haven't decided, when we allow ourselves to take the risk and plunge into not knowing, then we have the chance to hear something, to say something, we've never heard before. We run the risk of infection, of hearing something that we might never stop hearing. Could you be that open? Could I? When I think back, when I reach back and feel again the art that has touched me, that has moved me, that has motivated me, it is not an art of answers, of mastery. It was an art where something was missing. It was a sentence that I was invited to leave unfinished. It was a life that didn't need all the oxygen in the room. I feel I've been infected by other's quests and questions, and this has led to, or impelled, or reverse engineered, my own quests, my own research.

Not the significance of an answer, the awe inducing, breath taking, paralysis of a perfect answer, but the uneasiness of a question. The question that can't be answered, the practice that doesn't stop, the infection that is memory that refuses to end, because it's so necessary above all to remember.

Wuzu Fayan said, “It is like a water buffalo that passes through a window. Its head, horns, and four legs all pass through. Why can’t the tail pass through?”

2. Getting Lost

Chase: How much of your method can be described as a (never-ending) quest to make "that film?" The one that tells it, the one that shows it, the one that makes it make sense to you, or perhaps to other people?

Mike: What I hear you asking is: how can you set out on a trip making sure never to arrive? Let's hope it's a bon voyage because we'll never stop making it. If artmaking is a "never ending quest," as you describe, perhaps part of the hope in setting off on the journey is that it never finds home. It makes me wonder if making movies is another way of leaving home, again and again, caught in the perpetual wave of departure. Starting another project may be a form of saying good-bye, setting off for another journey without end. Never mind the GPS or the insatiable desire to map every geographical moment (our colonizers have returned as computer geeks), never arriving means always being a little bit lost. Doesn't it? If I weren't lost more than occasionally in the work's making, wouldn't I arrive at The End with speed and efficiency. I think this is what Picasso meant when he said, "I don't search, I find." In Godard's *Prenom Carmen* (1982), Godard answers this quip, playing a doddering, lecherous filmmaker offering advice to his niece who is trying to use his potential film comeback as a smokescreen for a bank robbery. He states simply, "Il faut que chercher." One must search. The necessity of searching, of asking questions that do not resolve tidily into answers, might be necessary cargo in a voyage that doesn't end. How can one search if one isn't lost? If one *must* search, then there might also be an injunction to get lost, like in the old schoolyard expression: get lost! Can you be a little bit lost or is it an either/or proposition? You can't die a little bit, you can't be a little bit of a son. But if this artist is interested, as you suggest, in going on and on, in a chase scene attached to an object that will never arrive, then it's important I guess not to arrive too early, or not to arrive at all.

“Freud’s sublimation theory is about an ongoing activity rather than a finished product, and it implies that there are many artists busy not finishing works of art. It is significant here to remember that Freud’s real interest in the study of Leonardo was in exactly this question of completion, of finishing things. Whether Leonardo’s works were actually finished or not is less important for Freud than the artist’s feeling that he had left something unfinished.” [1]

Astrologer

Several years ago, my astrologer informed me in no uncertain tones that in the next couple of years I would make the defining work of my career. In your words: “that film.” It would be the movie that everyone would think of when they heard my name. Did I say everyone? I mean of course the dozen or so artistes similarly engaged with these fringe emulsions and digital rarities. She assured me that I had two years to work on “my structure,” which was another way of saying my life, or sensitivities, or artist chops. It was as if the mold would harden and freeze in two years, and forever after I would be left with a rather too reliable mechanism. “And then?” I couldn’t help asking her. This is the problem with the future. You are offered a morsel and then you want to make a meal of it. A meal that never ends. “And then for seven years you’ll pick the fruit,” she replied, without a note of hesitation. It was her confidence that proved most unsettling. When I told her I didn’t speak the language of fruit she was glad to elaborate. “Picking the fruit” meant that after the trees had bloomed, I was free to sample whatever was in reach. Go ahead, take as much as you like. Only the trees would not bloom again. Try as I might, I could not resist asking the same question again. “And then?” She could not hide her disappointment, as if I already knew the answer I was forcing her to say out loud. “And then there’s a steady decline.” “Until I die?” “Yes, until you die.”

So there it was. The good news was that I was only two years away from my defining moment, the mega hit certain to ride the top of the avant charts. The almost good news was that I could coast on whatever gains I could manage for another seven years after that. And

the fatal message was that I was done as an artist, I had nothing left to say and no means remained to say it. How many five star bands knocked out late night pop hits when they were hardly old enough to shave? Only to find the knack had completely abandoned them after just a few short years of excess. I thought that those of us who plied the margins were granted a permanent relief pass from these obstacles, for one thing, there's not so far to fall when there's not so high to climb. And if these motion picture confections were neither art world consumable or part of the horizon of real movie makers, our double bind offered us immunity from the slings and arrows of outraged publics, popularity contests, markets and buyers, fair and unfair trades. Then the home computer shrank edit machines and sound studios to the size of a computer chip, and everyone's phone became a movie camera. What had been the exclusive providence of a handful of dedicated, speechless, bottom dwellers were now casual mom and pop throwaways. Just wait here honey while I toss off another avant-garde movie. Who isn't a video artist now? But wait, how did the prophecy play out? How does one engage in a practice that is predicated upon "that film" never arriving, so that the practice can continue to reshape itself, only to be stonewalled by a prophecy that assured me the thing itself was about to appear whether I was ready or not? What the hell was I going to do?

Fascination

After I had received the gospel from my astrologer, I was faced with another version of your question. "That film" was now staring me in the face, or at least, the place where "that film" was supposed to sit. My first impulse was to cheat of course. I would undertake an impossible project that would require skills I didn't have, and by failing I would not only avoid the prospect of a too-good-to-be-true movie, but would hopefully build some new muscles that might prove useful later, so that I didn't have to spend the rest of my days producing motion picture weakling failures. Shadows of my former selves. So when my video dad Colin Campbell died, I undertook a two year funereal trek with the maestro's glittering companions. During the making of *Fascination* (70 minutes 2006), I threw myself into the impossible world

of documentary, riven with a second hand grief that my camera attempted to soak up in between incendiary confessional moments that I was too busy living to record. I had little idea of how to proceed, as the four very public versions of the movie amply demonstrated. I remade *Fascination* so thoroughly, even returning to each of the movie's principals for major reshootings well after the final public screening had come and gone, that I could be sure that no one would actually see the movie I seemed to be in a rush to release, even as it clung to my computer. It became a way of keeping a secret in public.

There was another moment I can't help returning to whenever the prospect of "that film" arises. "That film" meaning the one and only, the definitive statement, the summary work. Some artists call it mature work, meaning a movie with a mustache, or facial hair plus full boobs. Look at me now, I'm all grown up. How I long to announce, like genius Canadian painter Stephen Andrews, that my mature work was coincident with finding out I was HIV-positive. I want to pump my fist when he says it. I want to throw open the window and shout, "Me too!" but I can't. I found out I was positive nearly a decade into my movie making life, when I was committed to traditional male values like speed and quantity (let's make lots of movies quickly). And I was still in the candy store phase of my movie life, everything about the cinema glittered and attracted me. I wanted to make movies that showed only grain and I wanted to make musicals, I wanted to burn splicing tape across white leader and I wanted to make sensitive dramas that would linger on pensive reaction shots. I was keeping my options open, I couldn't decide, and worse than that, there were two salient features of my method that have persisted to the present.

Ending

The first thing is that I want the experience to end before it's begun. Whenever I start making a movie, I am looking for the exit sign, the short cut, the end. Was it all those countdowns I watched as an experimental cinema infant? The first contact moment is met with a feeling of

undeliberate haste, let's get this over with, my rolled up sleeves seem to announce, as a dizzying velocity takes hold, a hugely intense wedge of concentration melts into the material and hurries it along to its finale. Eventually, as the finished movie titles piled up in the background, filled with a furious vagueness, skipping lightly over the small matters of subject matter and even the formal shaping of the work, I realized my mistake. Is that too harsh a word? Perhaps I could say instead: I blew the dust off the mirror. Oh look, here is the persistent inclination of the artist. It doesn't matter if it's raining out or not, whether he has the necessary shots, or if he's gathered the sound. He's forever pressing for a quick finish. The work proceeds under the same alphabetic motto that hoped to inspire David Mamet's tired salesmen in *Glengarry Glen Ross*. ABC. Always Be Closing.

It can be difficult to shift a deep-rooted tendency, better perhaps to learn how to accommodate this beast of an obstacle. Perhaps the sum of these accommodations are what might be named: an artist's practice. I'm thinking of a young Miles Davis sitting in with Charlie Parker. Davis was a trumpet prodigy, but the truth is, he couldn't hit all those bebopping notes. So he could resign himself as the son of Dizzie Gillespie, some paler, less sturdier version of his trumpet father, or he could embrace his shortcoming and turn in another direction. This meant abandoning bebop altogether of course, and with it a very particular black power expression that had become a rallying cry for a newfound black American identity. What was at stake was not simply a style, or a velocity of playing, but how to stake out a place in a largely apartheid country. By slowing his tempo and emphasizing the lyricism of his line and the vulnerability of his approach, Davis ushered in cool jazz (the first of many innovations he would bring on of course), as opposed to bebop's hot jazz scalings. And what cool jazz offered was an evolution of black standing in apartheid America. I'm not going to work so hard, or at least, the work I'm doing is not going to be out on display, pandering for your applause. I know I've got it, that's why I'm up here and you're down there. In his searching lyric solos, Davis had made a virtue out of what seemed to be deficit.

I'm no Miles Davis, that's for sure. And I wish I could write that shifts in my practice were the result of deliberations based on self-reflection and meditation. Instead, there was much groping in the dark of particular projects, and the needs they issued like wounds, and my attempt to deal with these wounds slowly shifted the approach. What I was trying to contend with was the breathless need for it to be over.

Paul Virillio: "…that dictator of movement, the film director." [2]

Lenin: "Strategy means choosing which points we apply force to." [3]

Paul Virillio: "Physical speed freezes you… Speed flattens the vision, like a screen." [4]

What I learned to do, eventually, was to race to the finish line, take a breath, and then start over again. I would race to the finish line for a second time, and stand once more in the sunshine of accomplishment, the dizzying satisfaction of having joined together unimagined worlds, brought them together across a bit of splicing tape which meant that never again could they be considered ever truly separate again. I learned to wait out the delusion of this afterglow, and then something like reality would settle back in, or the comments of friends, and having been duly deflated, I would return to the beginning of the project once more in order to start again. Starting over proved to be the key, and it arrived in different forms over the years. What was important was waiting at the end of the exhale, the most difficult place in the breath cycle. It can feel, physiologically, like dying, when you have exhaled the last bit of breath from the body. It is the posture of the body that is most *apanic*, deflated. The end of the exhale in a yoga class is named *savasana*, which literally translated means corpse pose.

It is the practice of dying. My habit patterns urged me to rush out of this place, to cover this absence, but steady practice allowed me to remain there, at least for a little longer.

And why die alone? I enlisted a pair of friends to help me see the walls I had built in place of outlook portals. Gary Popovich and Steve Sanguedolce are both esteemed fringe media artists in their own right, and we have been in a conversation about life and work for the past three decades now. I call them “the music.” Whenever I feel a movie is finished, it’s time to face the music, so I give them a ring and they come over and make detailed notes about what is and isn’t working. Their experience as artists gives them a deep feel for the work, but what is central to this ongoing conversation is that we are intimates, closer than close, and out of the intimacy of our lives we are able to air out opinions in frank exchanges. What is important is both the love that we feel for each other, and the pointillist mechanics of the work that can be unpacked and debated. But the music didn’t fully arrive until my video biographies began.

> **“What else has the proletariat been since antiquity, if not an entirely domesticated category of bodies, a prolific, engine-towing class, the phantom presence in the historical narrative of a floating population linked to the satisfaction of logistical demands?”** [5]

> **“My own conviction was that it (AIDS) wouldn’t touch me or the people I loved. I certainly was opposed to the idea of limiting my sexual encounters or knowing my partners’ names – what good would that do? True, when people came down with a venereal disease they were supposed to call up their partners, but I was from an older generation devoid of community spirit and once a month I threw out my trick chits (on which I’d marked names and phone numbers). Anyways, we were all big boys used to dosing ourselves and**

mopping up our own problems. Of course we'd never played for such high stakes before – death." [6]

AIDS

As you might imagine, having AIDS and watching people die all around you was not the optimal moment to undertake a new practice of patience. This new practice of starting over. Au contraire. What the diagnosis helped promote was an overheated climate of relentless, breakneck production. In other words: more of the same. Though the accumulated sweat equity of a decade spent crouched behind a wind-up camera meant that the work wasn't entirely lacking in lyric substance, and dying gave the pictures a certain sharpness. It was like playing tennis with the wrong hand, eventually it got better, and because there were no digital magics to take cover under, any deficiencies were only too apparent.

Let's try out a sentence that has been written too many times before, it would begin like this: It is impossible to describe. It is impossible to describe the anguish, the grief, the sheer volume of death that lay inside and outside of us. Every street corner was a reminder, every doctor's office a half-way station to the very end.

"Somebody at my gym became ill. He'd been a big guy, always snapping towels at buttocks in the dressing room, and he'd had a real mouth on him, but then he came down with something the doctors couldn't diagnose. Slightly raised brownish-purple spots appeared on his skin. One doctor said they resembled a disease that only old Italian and Jewish men got. The poor guy at the gym just seemed to deflate in front of our eyes. All the steroids and food that had made his body so immense melted away, as though a butcher were rendering fat from a prize pig. He stopped joking, then he stopped talking, then

he stopped coming. Someone said he had "gay-related immunodeficiency" (GRID)…" [7]

With this constant reminder of death, a death that could not be avoided either personally or societally, either in its local expressions in my body's ongoing failures — the night sweats and fevers, the thrush that made my mouth a fuzzy bacterial cave, the chronic fatigue and new sensitivity to light which was ironically named by my doctor "photosensitivity," as if I had become a living emulsion too prone to exposure, in other words, I had realized the oldest dream of the avant-garde and merged with my own medium. No longer would I require the removed intermediary of emulsion—soaked acetate, with my newly won photosensitivity I would become a living image, shadow of my former self.

It is impossible to describe. It is impossible to describe (in other words, my body refuses to return me there, to take me back to a place where death was such a reliable companion) the way I tried to retool my practice in the midst of this plague. How to avoid feeling each movie as if it was my very last, and therefore that it should contain a summary statement, a summing up of an admittedly brief lifetime's effort to reform the means of cinema production. And I needed to see through what had become for me a particularly virulent blind spot: the need to be finished. I had embraced a dream come true, AIDS would end the life I was hoping to escape via overwork, it was rushing me to the end, which felt somehow strangely familiar. Even manageable. What was less manageable was the ability to change speeds, which is one of cinema's fundamental gifts because time itself had been granted a material form, and along with it the ability to experience time in a fantastically new variety of ways. But I had my foot stuck on the accelerator, and found it difficult to unlodge in those years of incessant death.

Barthes

And speaking of those who can't stop working, who begin the act of making so that they can never stop, it is difficult not to return again to Roland Barthes writing about Flaubert. I'm struck always by the depth of this man's ability to read, he picks up a book like it's his best friend, he holds it in those large and sensitive hands, and he pores through the words looking for a way to keep some necessary mystery alive, to leave some moment of the visible world unanswered, unshelved, unclassified. To his readerly eyes, Flaubert is another artist who can't stop working, or rather, reworking. Like me, he is condemned to go back over and over the same paths, the same words, the same sentences. How bracing to find another father, someone else who has been there before. And even better, I'm able to read Flaubert over the shoulder of one of the twentieth century's great readers. It is nearly enough to give me pleasure, if only I could turn these words into a movie, and plunge in again to the warm bath of the movie I want to end over and over again.

Roland Barthes: "Long before Flaubert, writers had experienced – and expressed – the arduous labor of style, the exhaustion of incessant corrections, the sad necessity of endless hours committed to an infinitesimal output… style, for Flaubert, is absolute suffering, infinite suffering, useless suffering. Writing is disproportionately slow ('four pages this week,' 'five days for a page,' 'two days to reach the end of two lines'); it requires an 'irrevocable farewell to life,' a pitiless sequestration; we may note in this regard that Flaubert's sequestrations occurs uniquely for the sake of style, while Proust's, equally famous, has for its object a total recuperation of the work: Proust retires from the world because he has a great deal to say and because he is pressed by death, Flaubert because he has an infinite correction to perform; once sequestered, Proust adds endlessly, Flaubert subtracts, erases, constantly returns to zero, begins over again." [8]

The prison, or what Barthes names as "sequestration" is necessary for the production of writing. And inside the prison with its necessary solitude, there are two possibilities on offer:

the artist may add or subtract. There is the endless recall of Proust, piling word after word, or the endless correction of Flaubert, forever at work on the same book, season after season. What else might keep me company in the long nights if not the hope of this project? The work is a continual readjustment of distances, a restless realignment and renegotiation with materials, with past viewpoints (how close can I get? how far away do I need to be?) with the collision of events that are forced to reimagine themselves as they are rubbed up against other moments, sometimes far away, sometimes from the same neighbourhood of light, or ideas. Sometimes it's the same face that looks back at me from two successive frames, only it feels like two different faces, two different worlds, that could never share a moment between them. The work calls me to plunge into the darkness that follows each frame, every connection and disconnection, and to feel in them the calling of what Barthes calls "a correction of style."

3. Revolution

Chase: What is the project? What are you moving so fast to make exactly, or is that part of the secret you can keep only by showing it?

Mike: Yes, what was the project exactly? What were we hoping to do, what were the communities of fringe movie makers hoping to achieve by creating different kinds of pictures in our different ways? What was this place they called the underground?

I had been nursed, as a child of cinema, on the heady rigours of structuralism, an avant-cine movement that looked to the features of the medium itself as a capitalist paradigm. It was obvious that the camera and projector (they are inside-out versions of each other) had been based on the assembly line where re-Taylored worker bodies were smoothed to a ruthless and uniform efficiency. What could be more regular than the steady advance of film frames? Interupting this continuity, this mirage of movement, was like pulling the off switch on the factory floor. And instead of the slick surfaces that capitalism offered up as its display wares, its consumable come-ons, which worked hard to hide every trace of its labour so you could never tell who had made it, fringe movies would proudly wear the signs of its making. The flickers and fogs, the splice bars and dirt, the breathy inhalation of light that greeted the beginning of each roll as it was kissed by illumination – these were not simply markers of a cinematic enterprise, they were Marxist flagships pulled up alongside the capitalist fleet. By including these material signposts in our film works we wanted to make visible an invisible labour, and hence to reimagine the role of the spectator/consumer from passive receptacle to active participant. Oh yes, here was the oldest dream of the avant-garde, that we would turn our audiences into artists. It was a radically egalitarian hope that longed to emancipate cinema viewers by engaging them in the work of producing meaning. By reimagining the

dialogue between viewer and viewed, the dialectic of worker and boss was being summoned and recast, now there would be no more bosses, only workers.

Funnel

My cinema growing pains happened at a joint called the Funnel, an underground movie theatre on the wrong end of town with a hundred seat theatre and a small membership that shared a modest gear pool with maximal volunteer requirements. The Funnel ran bi-weekly screenings, workshops, published catalogues, schooled curators, and brought in a vast assembly of internationals. This is where I watched my first fringe movies, which provided an irresistible cocktail of confused wonderment. I had little idea of what I was watching, of how work was structured, even what it was about. My friend John Price, himself an august fringe maker sought out by fests round the world, put it to me this way. “When I watched TV I never saw anyone like me, I never saw my life there. It wasn’t until I saw my first experimental movie that something like recognition began. I couldn’t tell what was happening exactly, but this was the world I was actually living in.” [9] Slowly, as my attention muscles grew, and I could follow the trail of an intermittent scratch across an entire print, or count the number of errant splices in a screening, I understood (or this was the fantasy) that by changing the container, “we” (audience and artist alike) would change what was inside the container. The revolution would be led by radical content. Or so we imagined.

David McIntosh sat in the commander’s wing chair for a couple of years at the Funnel before pushing on with his own work as an international intermedia artist. When we speak I am staggered when at last he says out loud the words that have been whispering inside me for the past three decades. Has he added mind merging to his list of relational skills? But no, he insists, strangely or not, that everyone at the Funnel knew this all along, this is why we had all come together in the first place.

David: “If you read Malcolm LeGrice, his notion of structural cinema is that you take up the apparatus as content, which gives you everything from the installation of a light bulb in a room for ten days as a structural cinema work, to complete abstraction. The intent was to have an active audience, to escape the suspension of disbelief and bring into awareness a whole set of industrial relationships that underpins traditional cinema. Potentially, there is a utopic moment of liberation when the active viewer participates in the co-construction of meaning. As opposed to industrial cinema where you lie back, it washes over you and you leave. You have to be passive to be part of that structure.

I think we really believed we were changing the core of representation. It was a project of radical social change through representation. I think people believed that we would do this and we would prevail. That one day people would wake up and say Julia Robert’s films suck, I want to go and see a Michael Snow movie.” [10]

> **Malcolm LeGrice: “…in Castle 1 (1966)… an actual flashing light is both an interruption in front of the screen and also represented in the film, and by implication draws attention to the projector light as integral to the medium. This work, drawing attention to the audience space before the screen also extends the concept of medium to the space and time of the projection itself – a kind of temporal sculpture. So, these extensions of the physical understanding of medium are also extensions in the discourses between media and the social forms creating the context for artistic experience – and technology is no longer the carrier of meaning but part of the language itself.**
>
> **If there is a central consistency in this it is the change of focus from the condition of the artist as the ‘maker of meaning’ to the spectator as the ‘constructor of meaning.’ This is an ethical shift that is achieved (if it is**

achieved) by the aesthetic means of the work. It implies that the artistic experience is not one of retrospective interpretation – interpretation of the meaning put into the work by the artist – but of subsequence, the effect of the experience as it enters the life of the spectator." [11]

The strict attention to form was not a Funnel invention of course. For the past century anthropologists had been hurling their anti-static tweezers at one another, trying to understand the funhouse mirror relationship between language and culture. If you change the shape of a container, does the stuff inside change as well? Here is Marxist utopian Peter Fitting: "Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf were anthropologists who wrote about the Hopi and Navajo in the thirties. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis says that language shapes and reflects the world you live in; if you want to change things, changing the language was a good place to begin." [12]

"Structural cinema" aimed to turn codes into movies, the "language" of cinema was also its proper subject, and by changing this language, new social relationships would result and voila, that was the revolution. Experimentalists were cinema's code breakers: jamming, collaging, deconstructing and unpacking the old rules so that new possibilities could arrive. Feminists were galvanized along similar lines, working to create non-sexist and non-gender-specific languages. Double ditto for queer fabulists. Over at the Funnel we were determined to stare into the machines until we could see how they worked, how they produced gender inclinations, sexual preferences, hierarchies of power. The key to it all was attention. We would create new forms of cinema requiring a new kind of looking that could track changes in the smallest of events, maybe the shimmer of a face glimpsed through the heat waves rising off an engine block, or an arm resting against a wall. We would stay in our bodies in order to do the work of the present moment, and then we would extend those qualities of attention outwards to the cities we lived in.

Attention

Ellie Epp has made just four films in four decades, each one a miniature jewel of sustained observation. She wasn't a Funnel member, she had earned her new eyes at the London Filmmaker's Co-op before coming back to Canada. When she returned home she arrived as someone else, because she had learned how to look, how to wait, how to pay attention in a way that changed the meaning of home. And years of cultivating patience had accumulated in the body an urgency to create pictures. Ellie's build was always slow and steady. With enough patience, those years of preparation can play back the light dancing on a porch rail as if it was a car hurtling off a cliff.

Ellie: "Technically, duration is something quite particular — when you keep seeing something that doesn't change very much you stabilize into it, you shift, you get sensitive, you cross a threshold, something happens. It's useful for anyone to learn to do that. It's an endless source of pleasure and knowledge. And yet it's often what's hardest for people who don't know it as a convention. It's the central sophistication of experimental filmmakers. We all had to learn it. We probably all remember what film we learned it from. I learned it from *Hotel Monterey*, which Babette Mangolte shot for Chantal Akerman. Almost an hour, extremely slow. I made the crossing. It was ecstatic. What it is, is this: deep attention is ecstatic in itself." [13]

Judith Doyle: "When David McIntosh or I show films like Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (45 minutes, 1967) to students and drag the projector into the classroom and watch what happens to them it's unbelievable. They have almost no experience of watching something for that long without a break. The sense of time is almost brutal, you feel you've committed an act of hostility. Students feel gobsmacked, whacked in the face with time. But without

understanding that kind of time-space, I don't think you can understand the Funnel. The sense of shared duration was part of what created community." [14]

It's November 12, 1982, and France's Rose Lowder has appeared with several years of looking tucked into a few cans of film. She lived under a self-imposed regime of terrifying frugality, and was committed to extracting the maximal degree of cinematic experience out of the minimum of exposed footage. Her systems-inspired work eventually led her into frenzies of frame counting and multiple exposures. On the appointed evening I arrived and took a seat in the third row centre, as far from the other twelve disciples as possible. I had no idea of what to expect, and the project of experimentalism was so new to me that most of the time I had little idea of what I was watching. Lowder spoke briefly at the top of the evening, but with the notable exception of Stan Brakhage and Barbara Hammer, artists were reluctant to speak, worried perhaps that the pure light would be sullied with words. Perhaps they were holding out this hope for the assembled: that we could arrive without a thought in our heads. But whether they came from across town, or across the ocean, the artist's message was always the same: First the pictures, then the words.

Rose kicked things off with *Champ Provencal* (9 minutes 1979), in which she returns to a peach orchard three times, always sure to plant her camera in the same spot, making constant (frame by frame) shifts of focus. You could tell from its opening refrain that the camera wasn't going to pull back and show off another part of the world, the point was to stay inside the frame and quiver right along, and as I did I learned to let the tree look back so that I could become part of the picture. I accepted the movie's invitation to stare into that tree and learn its moods, the way it changed colour over time, in shadow and light. When I left the theatre I became newly aware of the trees on my street, struggling for roots amidst the swelling concrete heaps that signaled development. The film had allowed me to re-view my own neighbourhood, to turn the background into the foreground, until the merge of viewer and

viewed I felt in the theatre became the ground of a new urban ecology. The trees were not over there, backdrop to my thought balloons, we were partners in the same neighbourhood stand of light and shade.

The hope of the room, the unnamed collective project that was going on in the underground movie theatre, was that we could create worlds of attention by looking at the way these picture machines worked. Rose demonstrated that each picture contained a multitude of viewpoints. What part of the picture is coming into focus now? And now? And now? There was a universe waiting on that bark, for anyone who had the patience to see it. Once we could dispense with the word “tree,” or any plot-driven distractions, we could re-orient ourselves into the forest that stood inside this one tree. In other words, this tree portrait was also a study in fractured and multiple subjectivities. What was at stake was a rebranding of identity, via close attention to materials and long form attentions. All this would lead to new ecological playbooks. What had been holding us back all along were the containers, the language, the media itself was a message that had to be heeded. As queer theorist Leo Bersani put it: “The great power of the media, and especially of television, is its capacity to manufacture subjectivity itself, and in so doing to dictate the shape of an identity. The ‘general public’ is at once an ideological construct and a moral prescription.” [15]

The movies we clung to weren’t simply about escaping from the narratives of our own young lives, though surely that was a part of it, we wanted to create a different kind of togetherness. We came to drift together, not to hear the same story, but to drift each in our own way, across a suite of machine reflections that would show us the untidy guts of capitalism. Once the unpacking had taken place, and we had been schooled in the frame-by-frame mechanisms of the focus shift or the zoom lens, we were then freed to venture on a very different kind of trip. Out of that state of drifting we would carve out a new form of cinema. And out of that cinema, no doubt, we would manufacture new kinds of lives.

Mike Cartmell was a frequent club visitor and ran his own mini-Funnel in faraway Hamilton called Zone Cinema, named after Tarkovsky's dream destination in *Stalker* (1979), where 'The Zone' turned out to be a crumbling room that would deliver the seeker's innermost (and often unwanted) desire. Mike wrote me that "Drifting is a form of attention and inattention. The French word for drift (dérive) is used by Lacan and others (J-F 'Tights' Lyotard has a lot of interesting stuff on this) to describe the movement (the most fundamental of all movements) of the drive. The movement of the drive is something to which it is impossible in principle to give any attention whatsoever. And yet, I would say, there are moments in the cinematic experience when one is far from fascinated, or fascinated in some way which one can't explain, over something which seems to lack any of the familiar components of the compelling, and those moments seem, sometimes, to stick. (I sometimes call some of these 'moments of unwatchability,' but there are other kinds of moments that stick for me as well.)

There was an Australian guy at the Funnel in the 80s, David Bennell, who made a film called *Brooklyn Bridge*, or something like that. It was shot from a car crossing the bridge, and then going back via a tunnel. It was certainly one of those 'horizontal' films you're talking about. It runs twenty minutes or so, and there are very few shots or at least types of shots. Nothing happens. No moments of unwatchability. But there was something that engaged me, although I can't say what it was. I liked it then and I think about it from time to time now.

Why go have similar experiences again and again? Doing so is the very definition of the drive. One really doesn't have a choice. It boils down to enjoyment, which overrides whatever rationality would provoke such a question." [16]

Judith Doyle: "For me the Funnel was about a sense of community. It was about sitting through long evenings, like the work of Funnel member Villem Teder who would present us

with an hour and a half of emptiness. What was he doing with those images? They were beautifully associative explorations of material and colour with very little sound. Here are some titles: *Red*, *A Circle*, *Loop with Three Colours*, *Eyes*, *Cellular Progression*, *Incidents from the Trim Bin*. I think he was a disciplined filmmaker, but there wasn't a hint of progression, narrative or even accumulation. It was a big, flat, landscape of time that allowed the viewer to drift in ways that interested me. There was a sense of being in the same space with your friends who were drifting in and out of what he was doing, and then afterwards everyone went out for a drink at the Dominion Tavern and talked about whatever it was that we just did together." [17]

To underline the point again: what we were doing in that drift was creating meaning. We were doing it all at the same time, but individually, we were finding ourselves as individuals by undertaking this group project. the way we were coming together, the way we were creating a group sense, was by celebrating our singularity. Freed from the forward moving narrative drive, we were left to wander, to become lost, to meet this new moment as if we didn't know what it contained. We had left utility and efficiency behind. We were going to spend time as if we were millionaires of time, we were going to watch the individual frames flicker past like stations on an assembly line, and from our newly unalienated states we would let the work turn us into artists. This is how we imagined we were going to undo capitalism, ridiculous I realize, though it was deadly serious at the time. We watched as if our lives depended on it, and maybe for a brief moment, they did.

4. Fear

Chase: What do you fear? Is your work only a way of providing a container for your fears?

Mike: You've put it so well. Fear was my birthright and inheritance, a default posture, and overworking has proved a reliable method for dealing with it. By absorbing all of the unscripted moments of my unwanted life, working zealously can keep fear from seeping in too deeply, or at least from appearing on the windscreen, the to-do list, there's just no time for it. Though working incessantly can produce a stifling blindness. It's hard to see paralysis when movement is constant, for instance, as it was in the earliest and unformative days of my making. Like traditional movie audiences, I was seeking escape, though not via the consolation of living someone else's life for an hour and a half, but shrinking the world until it occupied a rectangle of encounter that could be returned to and reshaped. Again and again.

> **You asked me recently why I maintain that I am afraid of you. As usual, I was unable to think of any answer to your question, partly for the very reason that I am afraid of you, and partly because an explanation of the grounds for this fear would mean going into far more details than I could even approximately keep in mind while talking. And if I now try to give you an answer in writing, it will still be very incomplete..."** [18]

Of course these ghost appointments can only be put off for a time before they return at double strength and speed. Perhaps my earliest makings were a way of shoring up the ruins, creating a foundation of procedures, a commitment to practice at least, that could bear the slow turn towards the difficult and unspeakable. What was all that fear about? Never mind why, but where did it come from, and why did it feel like such a reliable home?

"My 'fear' is my substance, and probably the best part of me." [19]

Someone Else's Past

Dinaw Mengetsu's *How to Read the Air* [20] is a strange, double-sided novel that lays down a New York love story against the backdrop of immigrant parents. I write "strange" in part because of the book's great success, it is a New York Times bestseller and notable book, an Oprah book, and placed on many year-end best of lists. What is surprising about this, at least for me, is that the book is fundamentally non-narrative. In fact, for the most part, the book is about paralysis, and it becomes increasingly clear that the colourless blank of the main character who does not so much act but is acted upon, seemingly content to drift along with events as they occur, is in a protracted state of trauma. And what is peculiar about this trauma is that it is not entirely his own. The most important events in his life never happened to him. His most important memories recount experiences he never had. Instead, his past belongs to his mother and father. The stowaway journey from the Sudan to Italy. The car accident in Missouri. The violence of wife beating. This is the narrator's inheritance, and these events arrive through the reflecting pool of his own inability to move, his own stillness. How did this book, with its frozen postures, its unmoving and affectless centre, its often plotless trajectories, become so popular?

Perhaps it's not an uncommon story. While the circumstances are completely different, I can recognize these displaced experiences in my own life. It's as if the undigested experiences were handed down through the bloodline, and the processing of those encounters, overwhelming and impossible, have been left for future generations. Perhaps it's not unusual that those who have come later (even, in some fundamental sense, "too late" – i.e. too late to have access to primary experience, the stuff that memory is made of, the deepest grooves, the most profound encounters) should be the ones interested in the project of representation. Maybe there is a link here, a necessary relation, between fear and the act of representation

itself. What is at stake in Mengetsu's novel is psychic survival. If he does not write this story, if he cannot bring himself to bear this account, it will completely stifle him.

The way the story lives in him is that it creates a shadow life, it freezes him, makes him unambitious, distant, withdrawn, overly careful, unable to make decisions. His love story consists largely of a series of measured retreats and polite withdrawals. In order to tell the story of his wounds, which belonged first of all to his parents, he first has to offer an account of his own state, and because it lacks the primary dramatic drive of the "original material" (his parent's traumatic immigrant encounters) it is often drab and uninspired. How to create a space in (art) practice for these states? For the years of treading water. How to create forms that could convey paralysis or vague feelings of uneasiness?

Early Movies

For myself it meant learning cinema's material codes. Hand-processing, working with splicing tape (burning, stretching, freezing), baking film, growing organic matter onto it, I was busy creating moods and atmospheres. I hoped to conjure a collective audience state as a horizontal drift where cinema's usual narrative enclosures were evacuated in favour of a democracy of sensation. My earliest films suggested, they outlined areas of colour, they reproduced moments of late night seeing via grain enhanced deliriums. I wanted to show, to occupy temporal real estate, but at the same I didn't. I didn't want to articulate too much, I didn't want to make too clear what was happening, so that the spectators could create their own paths, their own movies. I didn't want to show a path, only point at a field. Each of these movies might have been called "Coming soon." There isn't a movie here yet, perhaps it's on the way, "coming soon," depending on how much of your own experience you could bring to the screen. Recalling the Rorschach tests that were given to some of my friends who displayed distinctly anti-social behavior, *Phonograph* (20 minutes 1981) offered only a series of black and white, high contrast abstract shapes ("Oh," my film prof remarked at the time,

“this is a movie that can play any image. Like a phonograph.”) There was a three film series made between 1982-84 called *Life Drawing* that materially reconfigured moments of daily life. There was a movie made entirely of film grain, another where I scratched out every word of the dictionary onto black leader. The most successful unquote of these movies was called *White Museum* (32 minutes 1986) and was mostly blank while a voice-over explained that I didn’t have enough money for the pictures, actually, it goes on, there is money enough for just one image, but that’s being saved up for the end. In place of pictures, a blank screen was left for the audience to project their own necessary fantasies.

Each of these movies are pictures of paralysis. I wasn’t ready yet to turn to the real roots of my experience (or my parent’s experience), to face my fears. In place of this turning, what I was indulging in were a number of material strategies. I’ve written earlier that these offerings were part of a materialist detective story called “structuralism” that hoped to undermine the entire project of capitalism by upsetting traditional methods of representation. Believe it or not. They remain the acts of a library revolutionary, and a person crouching in fear from the events of his own life. Or more to the point: they were shields to keep me from the events that were the heart of the matter, because the most important events in my life, like the lead in Mengetsu’s book, were ones I never experienced. My mother’s detention in a Japanese war camp. My grandfather’s stint in Buchenwald, his subsequent alcoholism, “madness,” and incarceration. The years of starvation in occupied Holland and occupied Indonesia. These are experiences that have marked my parents and that they have handed down to me as inheritance. They remain the deepest places of my fear.

5. AIDS, friends, dying

> **"Before his death, Foucault had managed, discreetly, gradually, to separate himself somewhat from the one he loved, even having the amazing reflex, the unconscious grace to spare this loved one at a time when almost all of his body, his sperm, saliva, tears, sweat – we weren't so aware of this then – had become highly contagious, and I learned this recently from Stephane, who insisted on telling me, perhaps untruthfully, that he wasn't seropositive, that he'd escaped the danger, whereas he'd boasted (shortly after revealing to me the nature of Foucault's illness, which he'd just learned for the first time) of having slipped into the dying man's hospital bed and of having warmed various parts of his body, which was real poison, with his mouth. I wasn't able to repeat Foucault's valiant feat with Jules, or it was Jules who didn't manage it with me, and we didn't manage it jointly with Berthe, but sometimes I still have hope that the children, or at least one of them, have been spared."** [21]

In his hypochondriacal AIDS memoir Hervé Guibert describes his friend's body, the body of the great philosopher Michel Foucault, as "poison." Foucault dies, and then Guibert himself is infected, and while he survives the publication of this book, he dies shortly afterward. To regard every one of the body's issues as poison, to feel oneself as a living poison, in this pre-cocktail moment, when so many of us were dying and the facts were waiting to be told, it speaks of a terrible and overwhelming fear. Everyone who touches me could die, I am a living contagion, on my way to death. This is how we lived, for how many years, keeping our distance, careful not to share water glasses or drink at water fountains, or share a joint or a cigarette. I remember tending to the cut of a friend who suddenly pulled her leg away, as if she'd been shot, "Let me take care of that!" she blurted out, and I handed her the band-aid.

Don't get too close to me. Because there is a dying distance and a living distance, and if I'm close enough to touch you, if I'm close enough to be touched, then I'm at a dying distance.

Procedure

In her strange and excellent book *Madness, Rack, and Honey* [22] American poet Mary Ruefle writes convincingly on the subject of fear. She approaches a pair of professionals and asks them to weigh in. The first is a surgeon schooled in the delicate art of tracheotomy. When breathing is blocked, it's sometimes necessary, as an absolute stopgap method, to make a hole in the windpipe. This is generally done as the patient is suffocating to death. Part of the procedure is that an accompanying crier calls out numbers denoting oxygen levels. The numbers inevitably descend, and there is a certain number beyond which the patient cannot survive. It is a countdown to death. Wouldn't this incessant accompaniment trouble the surgeon, double down the fear, making it even more difficult to perform the delicate, requisite tasks in a timely fashion? Not at all. And why? Because in this state of emergency, fear is a way of putting the body into a state of emergency. The surgeon insists "Fear is overcome by procedure."

The second man she turns to is a pilot. He recounts to her a moment in a test jet flying at 30,000 feet when a leak develops in his oxygen mask. There is no meter to check, no one beside him to translate experience into mathematics, no way to know what is happening until he passes out. When he wakes up he is at 15,000 feet and the plane is pointed straight down towards the ground, hurtling towards a final crash. He is hardly able to move, his brain an oxygen-starved fog. A single phrase appears before him. Cut the throttle and punch the dive brakes. Cut the throttle and punch the dive breaks… The plane is reinvented as part of his automatic nervous system, it is a knowing that is beneath knowing. He can't explain it, he can't think of what to do because it's too late for thought. Instead of thought he has a set of

trainings, or methods. Echoing his friend the surgeon, the pilot refrains, “Fear is overcome by procedure.”

Practice

An artist might rewrite these professional credos like this: Fear is embraced by practice. Unlike these high functioning heroes, I’m not trying to get up over something, I’m not in the conquering business. In their neat formulations fear is regarded as something separate that needs to be carved away from the self and shucked aside. But as an artist I feel I need to make a soft berth for my fears, to allow them into the very heart of my practice so that my work has roots. I think working with difficult material, with hard-to-pronounce subjects, with impossible emotions, with our dying bodies and dead friends, gives the work roots. There is something at stake in the making of this work. Without these stakes, the work floats aimless and lost, perhaps pleasant enough, or graced with a willingness to please, but airy and unnecessary.

> **“I went to bed for a month. I just pulled the covers over my head and prepared myself for dying. Other writers I knew who had been diagnosed flung themselves into feverish activity, determined to write in the two or three years that remained to them all the books they would have written had they been allowed to live to eighty. (“Even if I have to write them badly,” said the dying Hervé Guibert). But my ambition had been not only to express myself and create ingenious artefacts but also to pay my admission into a club that, now I was ill, had caught fire and dissolved into ashes.”** [23]

The double punch line of “Fear is overcome by procedure” also asks this question: what is your procedure? For a surgeon or pilot, their procedures are drafted in extensive guidebooks and manuals, honed and rehoned via decades of experience. The guidebook is also

something they embody, that they enact, that becomes them. There were long periods when artists also had guidebooks, or at least guides, when art was part of a system of securing hierarchy and social order. Apprenticeship, patronage, and mimetic traditions were ways of codifying societal fears, and turning them into professions. Today I am apparently free to make whatever I choose, to write my own manual, even as a daily deluge of internet-delivered normative informations work to recreate me. What is my procedure? Perhaps I could rephrase this question in relation to fear. What is my procedure for admitting fear? How can I turn my practice so that it makes a place for what I fear?

Mark

He was the most capable man I had ever met, with a charm that floated across the room on the tail end of his neon scarves that he was forever tossing behind him. When my friend Mark hung himself I plunged headlong into this place of fear, which at that moment meant meeting up with his closest friends and family at this emotional high tide. Every time we met each other, he died again, and we died with him. We watched ourselves dying together, and my movie became a record of that dying. Mark and I had made movies for many years together, sitting in the dark of our lives, watching pictures scroll past. There were many difficult decisions to be made during this one, decisions which another filmmaker, a little further removed from events, would have judged simply in terms of the movie and its requirements. Instead, I needed to follow the ghost of my friend, and ask again: what would Mark want? What would Mark do now?

The movies that Mark and I worked on were all biographies, which I would like to name as coincidence, despite mounting evidence to the contrary. This biographical urge was married, very early on, with an interest in “found footage,” pictures that could be stolen, hijacked, lifted, boosted, shot off screens, downloaded, transferred. Digital media puts image theft at the very heart of its making. Movies are no longer finished, only offered as up in versions, parts of

which will be cannibalized for other purposes, like Youtube clips, or website jawdrops, but also other productions with their own needs and hopes. Mark and I married found footage with the question of digital biography until the perimeter of our subjects exploded with quotations, clips, sound bites and borrowed licks. The way we dress, the hopes we have for our bodies, the way we experience work, home, desire, time – doesn't all this begin as pictures made by others? Call it the death of the author. There was a moment when it seemed it would no longer be necessary to make another picture, cinema could instead be dedicated to recycling the too much of what had already been produced.

And then the impossible happened, the thing that was never supposed to occur, the unimaginable event. My friend died. How could he die? That's how the movie started. All of the important things in my life have happened by accident. I think as a filmmaker, learning to listen to your accidents is the most important quality. I didn't begin making a movie right away, I came to his house so I could feed his cats and walk his dog. Every moment of that architecture was funerary, and I wanted to make a record of it. Every bit of carpet, every photograph, every unwashed dish. That's how it started. I wanted to build a small archive to shore up the ruin, to ease the pain of losing him.

The movie was made up in the dark, conjured a moment at a time. At first it was moments of Mark's apartment which fascinated, but then there were encounters which could no longer be put off. The maximum impact moment of our lives. How could the camera arrive at this place, with its mute digital stare, its ability to see almost nothing, no matter how long it was busy recording? How very busy many of us are producing what we imagine to be pictures, but which turn out, in the edit room, to be no pictures at all, but only placeholders. If only we had time to look, or look again. What I tried to learn, by steeping myself in the remnants of what Mark had left behind, was how to find the necessary distance between those who were willing to step forward and testify and their digital witness. What would they say? How would they

appear? I had no way of knowing, and a lifetime of watching scratches accumulate on emulsion seemed inadequate preparation. I was blessed with the fortitude and rare articulation of some of his familiars, who were ready to hold forth, at length, even while language proved inadequate, our gestures already too small and faraway to measure up against the gravity of what had happened. And yet. They were determined to leave a trace, and I tried to be there when they did, and gather up the puddles, and let them drip into the lens. Slowly, as the months crawled past, these began to accumulate. The way Kristen sat on the couch, looking glamorous even through her tears. The way Lauren presented before the radio station microphone, decomposing. The way Lorena's candles lit up the most distant corners of her face. It was from these faraway places (the furthest flung geography of her own face) that she began to reel him back in, one word at a time, one memory following another. For instance, she tells me about the rescue. (But who will rescue the rescuer?) Mark had come to help Lorena bring in a posse of wild cats one night. What were they using to wrap up their charge, to bring them into safety? It was raining and one had chased itself away. Mark was over the brush in a flash, and returned several minutes later with the small scratching kitten held in one hand. He was interested only in the strays, the ones left behind, the discarded and unwanted. Perhaps because he himself felt… no, I don't even need to say it.

Aftermath

When I had finally finished the film, after recutting version after version, I premiered it at the Rotterdam Film Festival in January 2008. There is a long stand of computers in the greeting palace, laptops mounted lid to lid in rows of twenty that anyone at all can stand in front of and connect with everyone in the world who aren't presenting in front of them. Anything but that. While I was standing beneath the full blown lighting grid checking my email, close enough to feel the breath of strangers on either side of me, I learned that my oldest friend Don Bonner had died. He had tied himself to a tree in a BC forest and waited to starve to death but a dog

found him and its barking alerted woodsmen. He unsuccessfully cut his ceratoid artery, and was rushed to hospital for repairs. In 2006 he burned his mother's house down and forced her to watch as everything she had turned to ashes. And then at last he succeeded in killing himself. It didn't come as a complete surprise, but at the same time I had felt for the past three years that I had been swimming towards the surface of a life I used to have, and that I longed to be free of this film of grieving. I couldn't stand to watch Mark's friends crumpling with grief again and again, I wanted to look at something else every day, try to build new grooves. And now this. In Rotterdam I felt as if I was looking down at my body from a great height, a small point in a universe of small points, standing inches away from a man heavily sweating and gulping coffee, stabbing visciously at his keyboard with his remaining free hand. I could feel my body blow up like a balloon, getting lighter and lighter, as if the same amount of matter were stretched out on an overly large frame, and then it collapsed, and I knew I had to go back to the hotel so I could properly melt away. Don and I had been best friends since the age of eight, born on the same afternoon in the same city. But Don was always more dedicated and rigorous in his pursuits than I could ever manage, he built each one into a mountain range. When he discovered Carl Jung he began writing down his dreams which usually took him until lunch. For a year he missed every morning class at school which he shrugged off, holding up his bulging dream notebooks. "This is the work I have to do." Clearly.

Three months later my friend Tom Chomont died, and then Babz Chula waved good-bye from her cancer ward just a couple of weeks before I was able to see her again. I was back under water, mystified that these beautiful friends, who had wanted so much to live, should be dead, while I had longed to die for so long, but was still here. It made me realize that the bargain I had struck when I became HIV-positive was that I would be the first out the door, but that way I wouldn't have to watch my friends die. It seemed a reasonable enough contract. But the cocktail had short circuited all that, and I had forgotten all about this bargain until it was

shattered by a succession of death. How could you? I wanted to ask them. How could you leave before I left? Too late for that too, as it turned out.

6. Buffalo Death Mask

Chase: Buffalo Death Mask. Tell me about it.

Mike: It began by accident, I can't underline the importance of that factoid. How to create a practice that might be open to accident, instead of being modeled after so-called conceptual practices where first thought/best thought decisions are introduced in order to foreclose unwanted vulnerabilities? The year was 1996 and Phil Hoffman and I decided to take a road trip south to see Mike Cartmell. Is Mike a friend? Surely, though he knows nearly nothing about me. He's so smart I just try to keep him talking in hopes that some of his intelligence will soak into me via osmosis. His second marriage had ended suddenly and catastrophically and after being summarily ejected from his Alabama home he wound up shipwrecked in a Buffalo rooming house. We drove south with vague notions of cheering Mike up, though perhaps we were the ones requiring cheer. When we arrived at his derelict east end digs, I remember him saying that I looked "remarkably preserved for my age" which startled me a little because I had recently gone on the life saving cocktail of drugs that had kept me alive as a cyborg. Though Mike didn't know it at the time, "preserved" was an apt word for how I was experiencing myself at that moment.

Through much of the eighties I rarely travelled anywhere without a camera of some kind in tow, today's telephone cams make this a commonplace of course, but back then it was rarer to lug around a wind-up 16mm camera in your knapsack. Phil was part of this tribe of diarists (shoot first, ask questions later), so sure enough, in a gesture of recollection and solidarity, he had brought his never-say-die Bolex camera with him, loaded up with a roll of high-speed, black and white film. When we found Mike cheered by our approach we issued some mutual updates and storytellings and then it was time to haul out the camera. The light in Mike's grim rooming house was predictably low, but Phil estimated that if we ran the film through the camera three times, there would be enough accumulated light to make visible pictures. Instead of the invisible pictures we preferred to present to each other.

Camera

The Bolex is an interesting camera to work with because it's not motorized. You have to disengage the crank handle, then line it up with a notch on the camera body and begin winding up the spring. Each wind lasts about twenty eight seconds, though as cameras age the usable part of the spring shortens. In order to rewind the film, the spring mechanism is disengaged, and the film is manually rewound through the camera with a handsome little key. These gestures of cranking and rewinding add considerable time to the operation of shooting, creating spaces where inspirations can condense, necessary pauses and built-in reflection periods collect in these time oases. They are rest stops that help create an approach to the image.

One of the qualities common to many analog devices is that they require some form of twiddling or adjustment or loading before they can carry out their operations. The digital camera, on the other hand, is "always on," and produces pictures before the picture maker can see them. There is no space before the picture, just as the camera is always on, the picture is always already there, and only part of a web of pictures, a temporary selection from infinity. I don't mean to suggest that in the good old days we used to make approaches to our pictures, whereas now, in the sordid digital present, the artless, anyone-can-do-it machines do all the lifting. Each technological moment has its own inclinations, its own forms. This is part of what it means to know the procedure, to know your form. Isn't this how we began as artists? With the injunction to "know your procedure." The procedure in analog, photo-chemical cinema required making an approach to an image. What does it mean to make an approach? Perhaps it means that instead of the image arriving all at once, there is some necessary prelude to picture making that must be undertaken. This can happen in many different ways of course. Winding and rewinding the camera are only a couple of ways an approach can be made, loading the camera is another. And the drive that Phil and I took to

Buffalo is another way of making an approach. We wouldn't bring the camera out until we had found our way to the necessary place, it was only when the three of us were together that a picture could be made. Our drive to see Mike was also a pilgrimage to a place where the making of pictures was possible.

Approach

> **"When a painting is lifeless it is the result of the painter not having the nerve to get close enough for a collaboration to start. He stays at a copying distance. Or, as in mannerist periods like today, he stays at an art-historical distance, playing stylistic tricks which the model knows nothing about."** [24]

Why is it necessary to speak of making an approach, what difference does it make? I believe that today many movies are made without any pictures in them because people don't know how to look at what they are seeing. This is what Berger names (in the above quote) as "a copying distance." If you don't know how to look at a face, then you can't make a picture of a face, all you can make a picture of is your inability to look at a face. The camera is pointed in the direction of its ostensible subject, but without a sensitivity to light, without some understanding of how framing excludes more than it includes, without an intimacy above all that flows from both sides of the camera, pictures are created that are only decoys, or false fronts. They may resemble their subjects, but offer little depth or understanding. The artist "stays at a copying distance." What the phrase implies is that the question of portraiture is a question of distance, of finding the right distance. In other words, portraiture is a question of ethics.

What making an approach offers (but does not guarantee), is that the picture can be made from both sides of the camera, in stereo. In order to have depth, pictures require stereo, which means that the portrait is not only something on the other end of the camera's lens, but

that the subject also looks back at the picture maker. There is a double look, and a picture with depth and dimension arises out of this exchange, this relationship. When a picture stays at “a copying distance” it is trying to remove the possibility of relationship, it is trying to take the place of relationship. Tourist photographs function like this. Instead of having an experience, I can have the picture of the experience I might have had. Tourist photos mark the instants the picture maker leave their body behind. The camera is shield and barrier. A lot of the pictures used to accompany news broadcasts are similar, there is neither the time nor the inclination to look at what is happening in a situation, so pictures are offered in a hasty monotone rhythm (as if every situation were the same), from a copying and touristic distance. That’s why you can see a city or a face on the news hundreds of times, but have no idea of what it looks like until you are face to face with it.

When I write “picture” I’m including sound as well, the conversation that Stephen Andrews and I had that anchors *Buffalo Death Mask* is an example of this stereo seeing, an exchange of viewer and viewed. Not a monologue but a conversation, a double seeing or hearing. But I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s go back to Buffalo.

Face to face. After Phil and I made our highway approach to Buffalo, after Mike made his approach via the ending of his marriage and moving across the country, after we had wound up a camera that newly belonged, owing to Phil’s unflagging generosity, to all of us, after we had made all of these approaches we were ready to make pictures face to face. Like every rooming house I had ever lived in, the rooms were small, cramped enclosures, and Mike’s penchant for reading was amply in evidence as books spilled out of every corner in every room. People with money are permitted to live their lives at a distance from others that can be negotiated. People without money live face to face, so here we were, having digested our approaches, but not each other, ready to begin filming. What would we film? Well of course, we would film each other. I remember Phil winding up the camera and handing it to me, and I

waited for a moment before turning back to Phil and beginning to film him. We handed over our faces with our cameras. The rooms were so small that most of the shots were made in close-up. And we had the courage of our approaches to bolster us, and it helped not a little that we had a cover story about making a film, or at least, we had said yes to a collaboration of exposures.

When the camera's spring wind was up I passed it along to Mike. Perhaps he focused on the smoke, or Phil's fingers, or my face. When his wind was done the camera returned to Phil. We weren't in a hurry, we weren't trying to get anywhere, or tell a story. We were trying to stay with each other in this room, in this moment, but instead of the flowing back and forth of language we would use our camera gestures, our faces, our bodies which were already turning into pictures.

Later

The next thing that happened in the film's making was the most unrepeatable and most important part of all. After the film was shot it was processed, and put in a bin and left alone for nearly twenty years. The exposures made that night were part of a process of gathering time, of allowing time to accrue on a length of acetate and emulsion. The filmstrip is not only a record of time's passing, but a physical object that bears the marks of time itself, of processing and aging. This time gathering offers many gifts, and chief amongst them was that it enabled me to forget about any impressions, intentions, or interpretations attached to events so long ago. I could watch the footage as if it was made by someone else.

When I reviewed it at normal speed it looked like a shaky, hippie flick, filled with cosmic superimpositions of faces and light that careened from one side of the screen to another. It appeared as a chaos of fragments, as if we were rushing across the rooms of our lives. There were three pictures unrolling at the same time because of the in-camera superimpositions,

and these multiple overlays added to the experience of too muchness. And because so much of it was shot in close-up, the camera jammed right up tight to these faces, they appeared inescapable.

Twenty years later, I asked Phil for the roll when I was making *Lacan Palestine* (2012), a movie where Mike appears as a Lacanian expert rolling out personal asides and theoretical implications. When I watched the roll (it lasts just two and a half minutes) projected I felt it was unusable for the project. But when the endless edit sessions of *Lacan Palestine* were done (once again I had to race to the end, and start over, and race to the end, and start over, and bring the music in, and bear up to their slaughterhouse remarks, and then begin again, over and over, cutting day and night for years) I returned to it. There was a kind of haunting involved, a ghost whispering, that asked me not only to see it again, but to see it again for the first time. Only this time I ran the footage in slow motion.

Slow

What I had learned in the past twenty years, reluctantly as usual, was how much time it can take to make an approach, to see a face, or make a portrait, which meant also allowing my face to be looked at, to collaborate. These collaborations, between a forgotten material and an artist, or between a pair of artists, can take time. In “real time,” projected at twenty-four frames per second our faces were a blur of accelerations, a speed mirage. In order to see what was actually happening inside them was to slow down the pictures. The technique of slowing is not a stylization introduced later by the artist, it is a documentary gesture, a necessary technical intervention that wipes the window clean so that we can see through it. The so-called “real time” of these pictures produced a blind, it was only by removing this blind, and rendering these frames at hyper slow speed, that I could at last see these faces as they actually were. After twenty years they had been retrieved.

Material Capitalism

These newly slowed frames are attached to the project that consumed us at the Funnel, that we might look into the machines of cinema in order to reformulate capitalism itself. In what is arguably the most famous essay in the twentieth century, Walter Benjamin argues that the cinema is an instrument that can be used against capitalism because of the way it renders time, its "unconscious optics" create new spaces of resistance to the capitalist project. The structuralism of Malcolm LeGrice is an extension of the project that Benjamin laid out in his seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), particularly in the following passage that I'd like to quote at length.

> **Walter Benjamin: "By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring common place milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action."** [25]

When Benjamin writes "unexpected field of action," he is giving us a picture of a battlefield, the battlefield of everyday life, that the motion camera is going to intervene into, creating new spaces dedicated to "action," meaning, the work of anti-capitalist activity. He goes on to describe a system of economics that has ruthlessly penetrated every aspect of our living, and holds up the cinema as a possible defense against these incursions.

> **Walter Benjamin: "Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling."** [26]

The hierarchical duo of boss and worker have turned the gathering places of urban life (bars, streets, offices, furnished rooms) into “prisons.” They are enclosures which have been constructed in order to subject citizens to a bio-politics of scheduling, a “standard time” of strict temporal ordering. And what might release us from these schedules is a device that will re-orient (or dis-orient!) the time of these spaces. Because film is exposed at a very rapid rate, twenty-four times per second, it is able to see what the eye cannot see, and via its careful, frame-by-frame review, we might be able to see what lies in the in-between moments of our lives, and thereby rescue them, liberate them.

> **“With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject.”** [27]

Here Benjamin announces the aim of cinema, which structural cinema was delirious enough to take up in earnest. For Benjamin, cinema is concerned with the formation of the subject, the viewer in other words. New kinds of seeing would create new kinds of seers, new forms were necessary to break us out of the perceptual prisons of our streets and workplaces. The piece that structural cinema would add to Benjamin’s formulations was its insistence that the machinery itself would show us how we as subjects were formed, and if you can swallow this then it logically follows that viewers could then be re-formed right along with the radical re-forming of pictures and sounds. It wasn’t simply a question of making movies differently, the liberationist project insisted that these different movies would create different people.

> **“The act of reaching for a lighter or a spoon is familiar routine, yet we hardly know what really goes on between hand and metal, not to mention how this**

fluctuates with our moods. Here the camera intervenes with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, it extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions. The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses." [28]

In *Buffalo Death Mask* we see a hand reaching towards a light. We can see the flex of each finger as it opens in hope and towards possibility. It is a hand bathed in light, refinding itself in incandescence, warming itself, relearning its fundamental gestures of grasp and release. What is mine, and what is not mine, what is okay and acceptable and what I believe in, and what I reject. We see a hand opening and reopening. These glimpses of opening are what Benjamin names as "unconscious optics." In their newly slowed state, these film frames show us, or this is the hope, something about the way a hand operates, something about the nature of this hand. In other words: the physiological roots of desire, of grasping.

Benjamin writes about the way space expands via a close-up, how this expansion and re-orientation of spaces could create new vantages from which to escape the duty and utility of our bodies and faces. *Buffalo Death Mask* slows down a few gestures of the face as a pair of eyes open, as Mike's face smiles and passes from one side of the frame to the next, as a smoke ring forms and dissolves in his mouth, his entire face wreathed in smoke, dissolving. Could we reconceive "the project" of the face from these few glances? Are these faces refusing the rush of time, the fantastical acceleration of pictures newly available online, are they offering places to rest the gaze, and to scan across the entire surface of the frame, refusing the centering typical of most informational imaging? Is the ability to scan across the surface of a picture itself a political act, or could it be? What does it mean to recast a face in this new time, and to create this time for a queer inquiry into an epidemic that many feel is already over? Are there ways that these faces resist summary and sound byte, that they

create a newly necessary time that makes a certain consideration of faces and portraiture, of time and seeing, of grieving and identity, possible?

AIDS

The AIDS crisis asked each of us so many questions, including: what is my body? This illness was not like other afflictions or viruses that would be hosted inside the body for a time, this was an illness that had come to stay. Am I the AIDS virus? Where does my body stop and the virus begin? *BDM*'s hand reaching into light poses similar questions about perimeters, boundaries, separations. What is not this body? What does this body not contain? What could possibly be separate from it, now that it has been touched and stained and reconceived by this ingenious virus, that has linked so many of us around the world in a common cause of sorts, as if we were all parts of one body. Is the hand reaching out trying to escape its fate, its status as a hand that has AIDS, that is AIDS? Is it a hand reaching out to other hands, in solidarity, a hand longing to touch, for one more kiss, as Jarman says with such solemn lightness in his AIDS memoire *Blue* (1993), in which a blue screen (he had gone blind recently, the film features simply the projection of a blue screen and a dazzling series of voices and sound treatments, offering a curious echo of my own *White Museum* (1986), made half a dozen years earlier, which was similarly comprised of a blank screen and voice-over) offers us a documentary corollary for the filmmaker's seeing.

Interdependence

The central trope of the original 16mm footage we shot in *Buffalo* is superimposition. There were several passes of the original strip of acetate through the camera, in order to ensure there would be enough exposure, so one picture was made, and then the camera was rewound, and then a new exposure was made over the old ones. The light builds slowly across each frame, on each pass, and as it does it ensures that bodies are rarely seen in isolation. It is so often our bodies together. Even when it appears that the frame is offering a

view of, for instance, a single face, or a single hand, buried in the white light of the "background" are pictures of other faces and hands. Most often though, the frame offers an image of interdependence, a shattering of boundaries, the same way that this illness breaches the body's traditional boundary of the skin. Newly reconvened inside the camera, we became parts of each other. The cinematic treatment mirrors the effect of the plague that is no longer rendered as tragedy but solidarity.

And what was only too clear now that the footage was slowed was how each of us was moving unmistakably towards our own death. Does that seem too heavy a throw down? There is a distinctly funerary air about the proceedings, not only that, these faces do not appear, to me at least, to be looking back from the past, instead they are looking back from the future, from the moment of their own death, when each face is dissolving into light.

In the cinema slow motion is usually used to arrest a gesture, to take some quickly moving form and render it weightless and allow us to see the intervals that comprise each apparently seamless moment. In *Buffalo Death Mask* there is constant movement in the slow motion, but what is being slowed down is rarely a gesture, only the smallest of inclinations, the opening of the eyes for instance, or a smoke ring being blown, or a face passing from the bottom of the frame to the top. And what is being seen, in each of these instances, is the way these bodies are dying, are moving towards their own death. Jean Cocteau famously quipped that in the cinema one watches death at work, and I think it is particularly true in this movie, where you can feel the weight of the body, the mark of the years already passed, the slow rapture of release and final succumbing.

Light

After I became positive (aka seroconverted) I learned how to look in a new way. Not because of the new divide between those who were and weren't positive, or because of whatever ideas separated the dying and merely unwell from the robustly healthy. I'm speaking in a

physiological sense, at the level of sensation and perception. I learned in those years, surrounded by so many who were dying, to be able to see how a body ages and dies in a single instant, the same way a speech glitch or a yoga posture or a DNA molecule synthesize generations of inclination. I learned to see the way that light came from bodies, as well as falling on them. Our dying selves emitted a very particular quality of light that I learned to see while sitting in the waiting rooms of Vancouver General, where an entire generation of men had turned into the walking dead. They were sad and angry and defeated and undefeated and beautiful and terrifying and each emitted a light that I could see when I could get over the sheer difficulty and terror and mirror-holding prophecy that each of us became for each other. We were a promise for each other. Today it's me with the facial lesions and the cane. Three months ago I was bench-pressing four hundred pounds, now I can hardly get out of bed. And one day, only too soon, it will be you. But out of the chests of these cane wielders and bent-over skeletons there was a rare and beautiful light that I learned to trust and was able to find more reliably as the frequency of my visits increased, and I became involved in the local version of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power).

Many of the images of *Buffalo Death Mask* feature this quality of light, they show light coming from the body, and this, more than anything, is what I wanted to share with the film. In fact, in its earliest versions, which lacked any dialogue, the hope was to concentrate the eyes so that they could be trained in these twenty minutes to be able to see what I had learned to see, that the movie would act as a secret workshop for anyone who would watch it, and show viewers what it had taken me a fatal illness to discover. That our bodies transmit light. But when I ran it for the music (Gary and Steve) they assured me that they couldn't see a thing. Yes, sure, there were moments of beauty, but they remained far away. Why should we care? This is what they told me. Turn these faces into something that matters. Apparently, these pictures needed the company of words. As usual, I had come to the end, only to find myself returning back to the beginning.

Starting Again

The fantasy was purity. I had hoped to make a single gesture, with a single roll of film shot decades ago slowed and reviewed. And this purity was also a salve to my need to Always Be Closing, to find my way to the end of a project as soon as it was beginning. So I recognized immediately what they were saying to me, that the project had an obstacle that I couldn't see, and the obstacle, which like all obstacles was designed to show me what I really wanted, was language. I was holding onto my silence, only to find that what these pictures needed in order to be seen was a relationship in language. There were going to have to be words. But whose? And how?

Stephen

I knew I wanted to have a conversation. What I hoped for most of all was to have some breezy speaker hold forth in a groove that would be at once personal and philosophical. There was only one person I could think of, and that was Canadian artist Stephen Andrews. Incredibly, he has been positive even longer than I have, and if I write "incredibly" it's because there's not so many of us left from that time. And it had been only too clear for some years now that like me, he had learned to see the particular quality of light from bodies that were dying. In fact, Stephen's work, whether his more recent painting forays, or his faux film strips, or his painstakingly rendered animations, are filled with this seeing. Over and over again his subjects were turning into light, becoming light, dissolving. It was as if we were working on the same project, but with different tools in our hands. I didn't really want to ask him about this though, what I wanted to find out, most of all, was how he survived the afterlife. I knew, or at least I could imagine, how he might have reconciled himself to an early death. What I didn't understand, the cover story I'm still looking to absorb, is what Stephen names "the Lazarus story," when a cocktail of pharmaceuticals brought some of us back to life.

We set a date and I showed up one sunny afternoon without much sense of what we might say, or the important questions I should ask. To be honest, I hadn't thought a lot about what was going to happen, though I had approached Stephen before, and saw the frank reluctance he showed to be involved in any project involving pictures that were not his own. I think the fact that I came with a tapeless tape recorder and no camera was a big plus. It's not simply aging that we are wearing on our new faces. The life-saving cocktail has a nearly universal side effect named lipodystrophy which redistributes the body's fat. It sounds like a good time at first, at least for the calorie counters, this drug combo not only saves your life, but it slims away the pounds. For the unfortunate few (and Stephen is one of them), it produces a pouch-like sack of fat in the stomach or the back of the neck (very attractive). Liposuction surgeons have reported that it is a lot like fat, though not quite fat. Fat-like at the very least. Stephen, like many of the similarly afflicted, is big on ab work, but has a little pot belly as if he spent his afternoons swilling beer and eating pizza. Lipodystrophy produces a telltale face that is drawn and shrunken, those of us on the drugs can see right away its effects on the faces of strangers, our faces have been marked so that everyone in the tribe can recognize the signs. Like many others, Stephen had cheek implants laid in, a popular measure for restoring some volume to the face. But this is all to say that cameras are not a friend to our crumbling architectures.

When we spoke it was clear that I wasn't going to be able to sit back and lob questions at him. In fact, as he immediately rang up queries in my direction about how many drug regimens I had been on, it became clear that if I was willing to speak with him, to have a conversation, a dialogue, then he would hold up his end. What we weren't going to do was any sort of formal interview.

Stephen spoke about many things, including the light which he had learned to see at a moment very close to the end of his old (pre-cocktail) life. His partner Alex Wilson had died of

AIDS, a slow diapers and dementia death where Stephen was numero uno caretaker, even as his own defenses were crumbling. Stephen's blood counts had begun to plummet, and he was close to death. He had begun to see magical Toronto media artist John Greyson who invited him to take a canoe trip to the Charlotte Islands. It looked like a last gasp, a final trek.

Stephen Andrews: "Everyone was pissed off at John because we were going kayaking for two weeks off the Queen Charlotte Islands. I was of the mind that you might as well go to heaven first and then die. Who cares? This was obviously unfair to John, but he seemed to be a completely willing victim, in case I croaked. What I didn't tell him at the time was that huge chunks of my vision had gone missing. The visual field had holes where there wasn't any information. And because I was on Septra and we were outside all the time, I turned red as a lobster.

We had an amazing trip. We had been out in eight foot swells on the Hecate Strait. The waves were too big on the shore to put in anywhere so we wound up paddling forty kilometres that day, and pulled in near Rose Harbour just as the sun was setting. We turned into the strait facing into the sun, and I had a strange hallucination where 'going into the light' wasn't about dying, it was about coming out of darkness. It completely retooled my thinking about what was going to take place. I thought: 'I'll go home, take the drugs, and be ok. It's not a shutting down, it's an opening up.' I was completely convinced of this, it was a very beatific moment." [29]

We might have spoken for fifty minutes or so, perhaps an hour at most. The point was not to have an exhaustive record of every AIDS moment we could summon, but to let something live between us, and to bring a piece of that living onto the tapeless tape recorder. Stephen and I spoke candidly with one another about the drugs that kept us alive, the moments when we might have become positive, the death of loved ones. Being positive for so long provided

a kind of gold card of intimacy, we could instantly step inside some of the most difficult places together with some understanding.

Collaboration

When John Berger writes about portraiture he talks about it as a form of collaboration, and that the art of an artist is the art of receiving. “The modern illusion concerning painting (which postmodernism has done nothing to correct) is that the artist is a creator. Rather he is a receiver. What seems like creation is the act of giving form to what he has received.” [30] That afternoon, with the portable digital recorder lying between us, Stephen and I did the work of collaboration, of giving and receiving, attuned to one another, finding a form of speaking that lay in the back and forth of the flow between us.

Lazarus

Our chitchat was cut into two parts for the movie. In the first we speak about drugs, Stephen’s former partner Alex, and the way friends are a living form of memory. When the voices return, after a dreamy impressionistic interlude where crowds of light gather together, Stephen talks about coming back to life, his Lazarus moment. It was only when he could let himself be loved again, he says, that he could find his way back into the world. It’s corny until you’ve lived it and turned it into something firm and foundational. I’m still hoping the day might come. Or is it something only the night can bring?

Lazarus was a man that Jesus brought back to life, at least according to the gospel of John. Wikipedia says: “…the name Lazarus is often used to connote apparent restoration to life. For example, the scientific term ‘Lazarus taxon’ denotes organisms that reappear in the fossil record after a period of apparent extinction; and the ‘Lazarus phenomenon’ to an event in which a person spontaneously returns to life (the heart starts beating again) after resuscitation has been given up.” [31]

The figure of Lazarus has obvious and necessary affinities with the project of cinema, which is likewise concerned with the project of reanimation. The material has already been filmed, it lies inert and unmoving as an object on a film strip or a digital file. Successive pictures stranded on an unmoving island of emulsion, or as a still pool of ones and zeros. But when it is rapidly unspooled on a projector or laid into a media player, these pictures jump into motion, or at least, the illusion of motion. As if they had been granted a second chance to live. The act of filming is a kind of entombing, a funerary rite of embalming, a way of preserving a passing moment. And via the projector, the twinned double of the camera, these remains are raised once more raised to light, and restored to life.

In the early 1900s, an early placard advertising the brand new invention of cinema announced that with the advent of colour and sound, movies would ensure that death would be no longer final. Here is the project of cinema most boldly announced: it was a machine that could defeat death by tirelessly reinvigorating moments of the past. And you can imagine how important that might have been for me all those years ago, before and after the arrival of the unwanted chemical rescue squad. I was also trying to reanimate myself through the not inconsiderable haze of fatigue and duress, and to preserve some of the too many sensations so that others might understand a jot of what had gone down in a generation marked by plague.

> **A.A. Bronson writes in his memoir Negative Thoughts about the two men he loved, his comrades in General Idea. Bronson: “In 1994, when Jorge and Felix were dying, I convinced myself that I was dying too, that the HIV was latent, that I had symptoms of illness, that my grief together with my desire to die would rot me through with cancer. I thought through my life as they thought through theirs, and we wrote our wills together. I came to a point of completion,**

a sense of satisfaction. I was able to say, and did: "If I die tomorrow, I will have lived a full life." I was ready to let go.

But life did not let go of me. It forced me to suffer.

Jorge died, and then through the fog of grief, five months later, Felix died too. I was sitting with him. I said to him, "Felix, It's OK, if you want to go now you can." He looked at me uncomprehendingly and fell into a small sleep. I went to refill my coffee cup and when I returned he was gone.

What is there to say of death? We live and then we die. While we live, we are surrounded by the dying, and by the dead. We are all dying. And the dead walk among us, surveying our decay." [32]

Astrologer

And what of my astrologer's dire pronouncements, dished with the reassurance that only historians and futurists seem to manage? She claimed that I would make my signature work, spend seven years picking the fruit, and then lapse into aesthetic senility. The spotlight moment for the signature work came and went while I was still busy reinventing documentary forms on and off the computer screen. Years later, I was ready to re-engage with some of the AIDS work that I had struggled with in the past, trying to find a way to create pictures in the midst of the dying. [33]

Perhaps Stephen's Lazarus narrative was a way of restarting my own project, of rescuing it from the stars, or at least, the starry designs of my astrologer. By admitting other's voices, by opening to Stephen's testimony, and recreating my own story as a dialogue, as part of a larger conversation, perhaps I could dodge for another season the endgame that was aimed

at shutting down the prospect of making beneath the usual middle-aged doldrums of audiences that thinned quicker than hairlines, of having to survive the failed utopian hopes of my cine-childhood, of daring to survive my friends.

Portrait

At the film's beginning the multiply superimposed roll of Buffalo faces appear in slow motion, and as soon as Stephen finishes talking they reappear, bookending the movie. Between them are pictures drenched in light, moving forms of what might be Stephen's paintings. I needed some pictures of him, what I was hoping for most of all were images of him at work, and he agreed to make some, providing he could do it himself. He used his iPad. These were collaged with images of Stephen from an early John Greyson movie called *The Perils of Pedagogy* (5 minutes, 1984). It was made years before they became partners (Stephen was still with Alex at the time, his boyfriend who died of AIDS), and shows Stephen as an impossible beauty dancing in a variety of bracing outfits as *To Sir With Love* lays down the backbeat. I wanted to recast into a single frame these prophetic outlines of Stephen's pre-AIDS self, as seen by the man who would bring him back to life, and layer them into auto-portraits that would show him drawing pictures of John, forming a circuit that would short-circuit thirty years into a few seconds.

Here is Javier Cercas in his modernist Spanish masterpiece of a novel, *Soldiers of Salamis*, in a scene where an aging communist looks back at his war years and the village comrades he lived and died beside. "Sometimes I dream of them and I feel guilty. I see them all: intact and greeting me with jokes, just as young as they were then, because time doesn't pass for them, they're just as young, and they ask me why I'm not with them – as if I'd betrayed them, because my true place was there; or as if I were taking the place of one of them…" [34]

I have thrown away nearly everything I've shot on film, many years of spontaneous gatherings and calculated emission tests. One of the few remnants from this twenty year period of making is a visual diary of my shingles illness, back in 1995. Stephen mentions shingles as a definitive sign of the passage from being HIV-positive to AIDS (in other words, he is not only infected, but symptomatic), and I was surprised to hear that he put such weight on this particular illness. I had also had shingles, but it didn't seem more significant than the pneumonia that I caught twice, and that was such a reliable killer in those days, or mono, or the host of other illnesses. But Stephen's shingles recollections lured me back into the archive where I could reanimate those long ago days and nights. It became a helpful underlining, showing my pictures with his words, a demonstration perhaps that the virus had produced new lines of interconnectivity and connection, new flows and circulations were possible. It's your mouth and my body, or perhaps a language of the body we held in common.

Memory

In his typically droll and elegant fashion, Stephen Andrews (in the movie) speaks about the double death that occurred when Alex Wilson, his lover and comrade for a decade a half, passed. Stephen: "Not only do you lose them, you lose what they remembered about you. And if you don't fully understand yourself, then you're doubly bereft. Suddenly you start to feel the hollowness in yourself because you had it backed up with these people… if you don't have these people who know you, then who are you?" [35] What Stephen underlines is friendship as a living memory, the way we hold pieces of one another in our bodies. I used his speaking in this instance as a kind of script, and began to gather pictures of friends, shooting in super 8 to give the images a grainy, impressionistic hue, and searching for the qualities of light that appear again and again in Stephen's artwork. While *Buffalo Death Mask* is sparing in its use of landscapes, settings, faces, concentrating attentions on just a few moments, this section opens up into a quickly cut montage, a suggestion or pointer to worlds outside the

film, of other lives. With these words and faces, the movie tries to extend the AIDS narrative to non-positive friends and family, wider circles of acquaintances are also part of the story being told. It is a summoning of interdependence, an insistence that the body does not stop at the skin, but runs through memory, language, shared experience, affect. I am your mouth when I taste the food you make. I am your "back up" hard drive recall for a night when you were too staggered to put the pieces together. The self reappears as a social body, as a collection of pieces, hence the fragmented quality of this section.

This movie is a double survivor's testament, a duet. In its back and forth exchangings it hopes to summon the outlines of a community, a group of people aligned with post-capitalist values, who had survived a certain death by becoming cyborgs, by admitting an incessant pharmaceutical regime that reshaped our bodies. You only live twice, was this the plague motto for the first worlders fortunate enough to have access to meds? Our lives had detoured around normative narratives of marriage/job/child rearing. And from increasingly marginal perspectives, we tried to resist what Sarah Schulman describes as a post-AIDS "gentrification of the mind" (in which a heterogeneous complexity is replaced with a moneyed middle/upper class uniformity). [36]

New Generation

And what of the new generation of seropositive conversions? I was floored after speaking with Cheryl, she is Dr. Cheryl to many, who has an all–HIV practice in downtown Toronto. She was describing a young man who had recently become positive and came to see her. The strangest factoid was his address: he called Barrie home. I couldn't help asking: "Why did he come and see you if he lives in Barrie?" (It's an hour and a half drive away on a featurless mega-highway) Cheryl replied, "Because he can't take the risk of being seen in a doctor's office. He doesn't know anyone who is positive, there's no community, he's completely in the closet." As soon as she said the words I realized what a privileged bubble of

a community I live in. I can be an ‘out’ positive person without having to negotiate the labyrinth of societal disapprovals that this young kid will have to manage.

The hope in making this movie is to try and extend the sphere of privilege, or normality, or sanity, so that others like him can be seen as people, instead of being reduced to an illness, a condition, a tagline. For most of my friends, I am the only positive person they have ever met. And similarly, this movie has been shown (so far) largely in contexts of large international festivals, or else experimentalist festivals, where this film is the only one addressing questions of positivity, where there are few queer movies at all. The people who see it are not part of the lifelong conversation that Stephen and I have been having with everyone around us. This, I have to believe, is a good thing. The point in all this is not simply to have the same chitchat with the same people.

The old liberationist dreams of the avant-garde have been repurposed as the project of fringe movies has become increasingly professionalized. If we once longed to become artists, today a new generation longs to become curators. There are too many artists now, too many movies being produced, what difference can any of it make? For now my work travels across familiar circuits of movie festivals and cinematheques, occasional classroom screenings and libraries. It is still committed to questions of formal difference and political portraiture, creating space for marginalized lives with roots in personal experience and expressions. And while the AIDS crisis may be “over” for some, each year there are millions of deaths, and many tens of thousands of seroconversions, and countless instances of bigotry and misunderstanding. This movie is a small attempt to stand in solidarity with the men and women who are living and dying inside these plague years.

Footnotes

[1] Darian Leader, *Stealing the Mona Lisa*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 117.
[2] Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, (New York: Semiotexte, 1986), 85.
[3] Lenin, quoted in Tim Jensen, "On The Emotional Terrain of Neoliberalism," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest,* (Issue 8, Winter 2011/12)
[4] Caroline Dumoucel , "Paul Virilio," VICE Magazine, translated by Pauline Eiferman, (February 7, 2011)
[5] Virilio, 77.
[6] Edmund White, *The Farewell Symphony*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997) 366.
[7] White, 364.
[8] Roland Barthes, "Flaubert and the Sentence," in *A Barthes Reader* ed. Susan Sontag, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 296.
[9] John Price, in conversation with Mike Hoolboom, September 19, 2013.
[10] Mike Hoolboom, "Resistance: an interview with David McIntosh," http://mikehoolboom.com/?p=13084, August 28, 2013.
[11] Francois Bovier and Adeena Mey, "'Discourse' verus 'Medium.' Interview with Malcolm LeGrice, *Décadrages*, no. 23-24, Spring 2013.
[12] Mike Hoolboom, "Utopias: an interview with Peter Fitting," (Unpublished), August 13, 2013
[13] Mike Hoolboom, "Notes in Origin: an interview with Ellie Epp," *Inside the Pleasure Dome: Fringe Film in Canada*, (Toronto: Coach House Press, 2001), 238.
[14] Mike Hoolboom, "Thinking Pictures: an interview with Judith Doyle," http://mikehoolboom.com/?p=13354, August 2013.
[15] Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," in *Is the Rectum a Grave and other essays*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 8.
[16] Mike Cartmell, email to Mike Hoolboom, (unpublished), June 6, 2013.
[17] Mike Hoolboom, "Thinking Pictures: an interview with Judith Doyle," http://mikehoolboom.com/?p=13354, August 2013.
[18] Franz Kafka, *Letter to His Father*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 51.
[19] Kafka, 32.
[20] Dinaw Mengestu, *How to Read the Air*, (London: Riverhead Trade, 2011).
[21] Hervé Guibert, *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life,* (New York: High Risk, 1990), pg. 121.
[22] Mary Ruefle, *Madness, Rack, and Honey: Collected Lectures*, (Seattle: Wave Books, 2011)
[23] White, 366.
[24] John Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2001), 16.
[25] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, (New York: Schocken, 1969), 223.
[26] Benjamin, 236.
[27] Benjamin, 236.
[28] Benjamin, 236.
[29] Mike Hoolboom, "Life After Death: an interview with Stephen Andrews," unpublished, 2013.
[30] Berger, 18.
[31] "Lazarus of Bethany," Wikipedia page, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lazarus_of_Bethany, September 2013.
[32] A.A. Bronson, *Negative Thoughts*, (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2001), 50.

[33] In 1993 I made *Frank's Cock*, an eight minute short that was explicitly about AIDS. This was followed up in 1996 with *Letter from Home,* a fifteen minute movie that gathered a community of speakers about AIDS.
[34] Javier Cercas, *Soldiers of Salamis*, (Barcelona: Tusquets Editores, 2001), 198.
[35] Stephen Andrews, voice-over in Buffalo Death Mask by Mike Hoolboom, digital cinema, 2013.
[36] Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012)

Mike Hoolboom Filmography

1980 Song for Mixed Choir (8 minutes)
1981 Now, Yours (10 minutes)
1986 White Museum (32 minutes)
1991 Indusium (11 minutes)
1992 ~~Mexico~~ (with Steve Sanguedolce) (35 minutes)
1993 Escape in Canada (9 minutes); Frank's Cock (8 minutes)
1995 House of Pain (50 minutes)
1996 Letters From Home (15 minutes)
1998 Panic Bodies (70 minutes)
2002 Tom (50 minutes)
2003 Imitations of Life (70 minutes); In the Dark (8 minutes)
2004 Public Lighting (76 minutes)
2006 Fascination (70 minutes)
2009 Mark (70 minutes)
2012 Lacan Palestine (70 minutes)
2013 Buffalo Death Mask (23 minutes)

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